DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 402 CS 504 280

AUTHOR Schmidt, Molly Spengler; Schmidt, Mark J.
TITLE Applications of Direct Mail in Voter Turnout Activities.
PUB DATE 28 May 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Dallas, TX, May 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; Content Analysis; Letters (Correspondence); *Motivation Techniques; *Persuasive Discourse; *Politics; Voting
IDENTIFIERS *Direct Mail Campaigns; *Persuasive Strategies; Political Campaigns; Voters

ABSTRACT

A study examined the strategies used in 11 "get-out-the-vote" (GOTV) 1982 direct mail campaign letters, which were mailed on behalf of Republican candidates in two gubernatorial, one congressional, and one U.S. Senate race. All letters were mailed from four states with different political climates: Illinois, Minnesota, California, and Virginia. Nine of the eleven letters analyzed employed between six and eight compliance-gaining strategies such as punishment or reward appeals, or altruism, argument, and circumvention strategies. These samples tended to use much the same language style, and were representative of most political direct mail pieces. The other two letters used only the strategies of direct request and explanation through the use of empirical evidence. The Illinois letter, which was very short, began by refuting the requests typically made by political direct mail. Readers were asked to mail a card expressing their commitment to vote. Even though actual effectiveness is unverifiable, initial commitment cards and absentee ballot responses provided a sound basis for evaluating overall effectiveness. Considering that the two most successful GOTV mailings used only two compliance strategies, it seemed reasonable to link effectiveness with the utilization of a limited number of compliance strategies. In comparing the GOTV letters containing eight compliance strategies with the letters containing two strategies, it was easy to determine that the two-strategy letters were easier to absorb and much more straightforward. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED233402

APPLICATIONS OF DIRECT MAIL IN VOTER TURNOUT ACTIVITIES

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Molly Spengler Schmidt

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

A paper presented to the annual Convention of the International Communication Association, May 28, 1983

by

Molly Spengler Schmidt, Communication Consultant
Illinois Republican State Senate Staff

and

Mark J. Schmidt, Director of Communication
Illinois Republican State Committee

CS 504280

From its beginnings as an experiment, political direct mail has grown into a sophisticated technology with a demonstrated impact on the outcome of political contests. Professionals from across the political and ideological spectrum have come to share the opinion that in the last stages of a campaign, direct mail is the single most effective communication tool available to candidates for fundraising and voter persuasion (National Republican Congressional Committee, 1981).

The popularity of political direct mail stems not only from the ability to target specific messages to specific recipients, but also from the knowledge that each message stands a reasonably good chance of being read. On study indicated that 75 percent of those individuals who receive political direct mail actually do read it (Sabato, 1981). As a result, a significant majority of federal candidates now utilize political direct mail in some form (National Republican Congressional Committee, 1979). In addition, state legislative and county level candidates are also increasing their use of political direct mail for fundraising and voter persuasion.

While communication scholars have recently begun to examine the use of political direct mail for fundraising and have established fundraising direct mail as a distinct rhetorical genre (Cutbirth and Rasmussen, 1982), most have ignored the analysis of direct mail which serves to actuate and motivate voters to go to the polls on election day.

In Form and Genre, Campbell and Jamieson define a genre as a dynamic fusion of three elements, substance, style, and situation. This definition coincides with the Aristotelian view that a genre is defined by a kind of audience that makes a decision on a distinctive issue developed through recurring lines of argument, characterized by a typical style, and employing certain strategies that are particularly apt for the circumstances involved. Even though many of the fundraising and get-out-the-vote [GOTV] letters utilize the same stylistic elements, GOTV letters are situationally and substantively different from other forms of political direct mail. The urgency of the situation is apparent: the candidate must have the votes of those who read his letters. Therefore, GOTV direct mail can be established as a separate rhetorical genre.

GOTV direct mail offers candidates an additional personalized tool with which to reach voters. The impact of the personalized tool is so significant that political practitioners claim that GOTV letters can and do provide the winning edge in campaigns (Blumenthal, 1983).

Because GOTV direct mail contains the components of a separate rhetorical genre, and because of the significant impact that GOTV letters have on a political contest, it becomes important that we analyze the strategies utilized in GOTV direct mail.

Analysis and Methodology

Advanced computer technology has enabled many candidates to not only maintain and utilize voter name lists, but also to identify and send letters selectively to those voters. If organized properly, computerized lists can identify voters according to such criteria as political ideology, profession, and issue orientation. Candidates are also able to sort their lists by zip code in a matter of seconds to obtain lists of voters from a particular area of the state. Because of these extensive capabilities, and the extensive utilization of GOTV direct mail, it was necessary to limit the number of letters analyzed while still providing a representative sampling of letters mailed.

Eleven samples of GOTV letters were chosen for analysis. The letters were mailed by, or on behalf of, Republican candidates in two gubernatorial, one congressional, and one U.S. Senate race. All letters were mailed during the late stages of the 1982 campaign, and came from four states with different political climates [Illinois, Minnesota, California, and Virginia].

The letters were targeted to five audiences. Four letters were regional mailings, three were messages to voters generated as a result of phone bank calls to favorable, undecided, and unreachable voters, and two letters were mailed to registered Republicans or those voters who cast Republican ballots in the last primary. One candidate utilized issue identification in order to actuate those voters employed in agriculturally related professions. The political strategy of endorsement was also used in one GOTV letter mailed by an association to individuals on that association's mailing list.

The overriding goal of each GOTV letter is to actuate and motivate voters to go to the polls on election day. It becomes necessary for the candidate to utilize every available appeal. Typically, analyses of motivational messages have employed persuasive analytical tools. However, most federal and statewide candidates do not have the time and/or opportunity to meet every voter in his or her constituency. Letters then become a means of establishing a temporary interpersonal relationship with the voter. It is this

interpersonal link which leads to the overall effectiveness of the GOTV letter. It then becomes obvious that any analysis of GOTV letters should utilize both an interpersonal and persuasive message typology.

Compliance-gaining message research provides such typologies. Compliance gaining research has typically been considered to be persuasive research. However, much of the research in this area includes validation through interpersonal situational settings.

Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin (1981) developed a 14 step, multidimensional scaling validation of compliance-gaining strategies [Table 1] The researchers chose to validate the typology by asking respondents to imagine themselves in a specific interpersonal situation, and to respond to that situation. Because the aspects of both persuasion and interpersonal communication were involved in the study, the typology provides a sound model for application to GOTV direct mail.

After examining the content of the GOTV letters, it was determined that the letters utilized generally positive appeals, as identified by Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin. The six categories not employed by the GOTV letter writers tended to be negative in nature, or depicting the vision of a villain who would to absolutely anything for a vote.

Seven of the eight appeals found within the GOTV letters asked for compliance, rather than for an action or response through non-compliance. These appeals conveyed a generally positive attitude. The eighth appeal, warning, was used only to convey the ramifications of policies which might be implemented if an opponent were elected. Even then, the message was limited to one or two sentences, was combined with other appeals, and was rather subject to interpretation by the reader.

Because the main goal of GOTV direct mail is to actuate and motivate voters, it was not surprising to find that the most commonly utilized appeal was direct request. Phrases such as "Go to the polls on Tuesday, November 2, and vote for my re-election" (Durenburger, Phone Bank, Undecided, 1982), and "cast your ballot for Stan Parris on November 2" (National Association of Realtors, 1982) were found in each of the letters.

Explanation appeals were used throughout the direct mail samples reviewed. However, inference of empirical evidence was the primary form of explanation utilized. "Inflation has been reduced from 13% to less than 6% annually" (Durenberger, Phone Bank, Favorable, 1982), and "I voted to cut federal spending" (Durenburger, Agricultural Issues, 1982) are two such

TABLE 1

Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin Typology

I. Sanction Strategies
  A. Reward Appeals
    1. Rewards are controlled by the actor
      a. Ingratiation: Present reward from actor implies compliance
      b. Promise: Compliance implies future reward from actor
      c. Debt: Past reward from actor implies compliance
    2. Rewards are controlled by the target
      a. Esteem: Compliance implies future reward because of target's action
    3. Rewards are controlled by circumstance
      a. Allurement: Compliance implies future reward because of the action of forces other than the actor or target
  B. Punishment Appeals
    1. Punishments are controlled by the actor
      a. Aversive Stimulation: Non-compliance implies present punishment
      b. Threat: Non-compliance implies future punishment
    2. Punishments are controlled by the target
      a. Guilt: Non-compliance implies future punishment because of target's actions
    3. Punishments are controlled by circumstance
      a. Warning: Non-compliance implies future punishment because of action of forces other than the actor or target
II. Altruism strategies
  A. Altruism: "Comply for my sake"
III. Argument Strategies
  A. Response controlled by rationale, not revealed by actor
    1. Direct Request: "I want you to do this"
  B. Response controlled by rationale, revealed by actor
    1. Explanation: The reason for complying is based on evidence
  C. Response controlled by rationale, situational context revealed by actor
    1. Hinting: Given this context, target should infer desired response
IV. Circumvention Strategies
  A. Deceit: Given false rationale or reward, compliance is requested

Source: (Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin, 1981)

examples. The evidence provides good reasons for compliance, and thus, GOTV strategies are strengthened. Two of the letters used a different tactic to obtain the same goal. "3.1 million registered voters will not bother to vote in a non-presidential election year" (Thompson, et. al., 1982), and "Democrats outnumber Republicans in California by nearly 2 - 1" (Deukmejian, 1982) are phrases that are empirical in nature, and motivated voters for political rather than issue-oriented reasons.

Explanation through reference of a value system was used on a very limited basis and only when combined with an additional form of appeal. Many would assume that references to value systems would be a component of all direct mail. However, no specific examples could be found, except through implication.

The appeal of explanation through credibility is woven throughout eight of the letters. Each candidate attempted to provide a basis for trustworthiness, integrity, and expertise. This appeal generally bordered on utilizing the debt appeal: "Since I was elected in 1978, I've spent a lot of time and effort working on problems in Minnesota". This appeal stopped short of actually recalling the favor. By adding the additional qualifying sentence, "And I'm proud that many of those efforts were successful" (Durenburger, Agricultural Issues, 1982), the appeal leads the reader to subconsciously believe that they owe the candidate something without the candidate having to ask for it.

Debt appeals in the GOTV samples differ from credibility appeals because of the specificity of the message. Debt messages were centered more toward me/I orientations. "If you re-elect me to the U.S. Senate, I'll keep the same priorities -- the people of Minnesota come first" (Durenburger, Regional, 1982) is representative of debt appeals found in the samples. In addition, the candidates used past voting records to strengthen their compliance-gaining strategies: "When I was elected in 1978, I made you and every citizen in Minnesota a commitment to reform tax policy to let people keep more of the money they earn... and I've done exactly what I promised" (Durenburger, Phone Bank, Undecided, 1982).

Esteem appeals also seemed to be an underlying strategy in each of the letters. Readers are led to believe that if they vote they will feel better about themselves. Only one specific example could be found in the sample letters: "You can do something about our economy and the futures of your

family, your neighbors, and all Americans by casting your ballot for Stan Parris on November 2" (National Association of Realtors, 1982).

"Your vote is so important to me -- and to thousands of people I must help in Minnesota during the next six years" (Durenburger, Phone Bank, Favorable, 1982) is an example of allurement appeals. Readers can identify with the ideas of helping others, making the world a better place, and helping themselves in the process.

Promise appeals were identified in the letters following statements of candidate voting records and issue positions. "If I can count on your support to re-elect me on November 2, I will continue to be available to you and every one of our citizens for help" (Durenburger Phone Bank, Undecided, 1982), was preceded by the previous track record of the candidate involved.

Only one letter utilized altruism strategies. "It would mean so much to me" (Durenburger, Phone Bank, Unreachable, 1982), provides some additional empathy and identification with the candidate. It also enhances the interpersonal nature of GOTV letters.

Warning strategies were utilized in order to present the ideological differences between the candidate and his opponent. "He wants to return to the simplistic economic solutions tried in the 1960's and 1970's to solve our problems -- more federal spending and high taxes" (Durenburger, Regional, 1982). This sentence is the only warning about the opposition given to readers in the entire letter. The message is short but effective: if one chooses to cast their vote for the opponent, they will be voting for more federal spending and higher taxes.

Discussion

In a time when it is literally impossible for federal and statewide candidates to personally meet more than a small percentage of actual voters, direct mail is the most personal means available for communicating with the majority of voters. Compliance-gaining strategies, when used properly, can elicit the appropriate response and achieve the substantive goal of the letter.

The candidates utilizing the analyzed GOTV letters were all successful in their quest for office. It is impossible to determine the precise effect of each GOTV mailing because of other campaign factors (campaign climate, voter and

and media response to the issues, other candidates, etc). In addition, each of the GOTV letters analyzed was accompanied by additional inserts in the mailing. Senator Durenburger included newspaper reprints, brochures, and commitment cards. The Illinois Republican Party also included a commitment card. At this particular time it is difficult to separate the letter from the mailing. In fact, it is quite likely that it will be impossible to ever verify these results. Candidates are simply not willing to take a chance on losing an election for the sake of research.

Nine of the eleven letters analyzed employed between six and eight of Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin's compliance-gaining strategies. These samples tended to use much the same language style, and were representative of most political direct mail pieces. The other two letters only utilized the strategies of direct request and explanation through the use of empirical evidence. The evidence used did not support the voting record of a candidate. Instead, the evidence dealt with the political odds of the election: "3.1 million voters will not bother to vote in a non-presidential election year" (Thompson, et. al., 1982).

The Deukmejian for Governor letter was designed to elicit absentee voters. The mailing included the GOTV letter which was short, concise, and very to the point: George Deukmejian needs your vote. A list of other statewide and federal Republican candidates, along with an application for an absentee ballot were also included in the package. This was a highly successful GOTV package. When the popular vote was totalled among those who actually turned out at the polls on November 2, George Deukmejian lost the election. Because of the more than 300,000 voters who returned Governor Deukmejian's absentee ballot application, the new Governor of California can now boast a victory of almost 100,000 votes.

The Illinois Republican Party GOTV letter (Thompson, et. al, 1982) also had a great deal of impact on Governor Jim Thompson's bid for a record third term in office. The Illinois GOTV letter was regionalized in that the letters were signed by the Republican County Chairman from that particular county. Republican State Chairman Don Adams and the Governor also signed the letters.

The Illinois letter was very short, and began by refuting the requests typically made by political direct mail: "First, we're not asking you for a donation. Nor are we asking you to canvass your neighborhood. No, we're

not asking you to put a sign in your yard, and we're not even asking you to put on a bumper sticker." This was, in all likelihood, a welcomed letter for voters who are on several mailing lists.

The letter was also accompanied by a commitment card. Readers were asked to mail the card in and express their commitment to vote. The impact of this request is increased because the voters were required to supply postage -- the card was not post-paid.

GOTV letters were mailed to 27 downstate Illinois counties. 24 of these counties were carried by Governor Thompson over challenger Adlai Stevenson. Even though these counties constitute only a small percentage of the total vote during 1982, Governor Thompson's margin of victory was only 5,074 votes. When one considers that in eight of the counties mailed Thompson actually increased his vote totals over 1978 [a landslide year] when Republicans were faring badly throughout the rest of Illinois, the impact of the GOTV letters is increased.

Even though actual effectiveness is unverifiable, initial commitment cards and absentee ballot responses provide a sound basis for evaluating overall effectiveness. Considering that the two most successful GOTV mailings utilized only two compliance-gaining strategies, it seems reasonable to link effectiveness with the utilization of a limited number of compliance-gaining strategies. When re-reading a GOTV letter that utilized eight strategies, and comparing it to a shorter GOTV letter employing only two strategies, it is easy to determine which letter is more easily absorbed. The two strategy letter is straight-forward and does not attempt to build up support -- it simply asks for the vote.

GOTV letters can be considered a significant and distinct rhetorical genre. Through the examination of the various compliance-gaining message strategies utilized, it becomes evident that the impact of the letters is possibly one of the most significant factors in a political contest. Political direct mail efforts can literally make of break a campaign. Because of this, researchers in both politics and academia should devote more effort to the study of GOTV efforts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blumenthal, Mari. Unpublished memorandum dated March 24, 1983.

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs and Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, ed. "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction" in Form and Genre. Falls Church: Speech Communication Association, 1978, p. 18-25.

Cutbirth, Craig and Rasmussen, Cynthia. "Direct Mail: The State of the Art". An unpublished paper presented at the convention of the Central States Speech Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April, 1982.

Deukmejian, George. Unpublished letter dated October, 1982.

Durenburger, David. Unpublished letter on Agricultural Issues, dated October, 1982.

Durenburger, David. Unpublished letter to Phone Bank Favorables, dated October, 1982.

Durenburger, David. Unpublished letter to Phone Bank Undecideds, dated October, 1982.

Durenburger, David. Unpublished letter to Phone Bank Unreachables, dated October, 1982.

Durenburger, David. Unpublished letter to Regional Voters, dated October, 1982.

National Republican Congressional Committee. 1978 Post Election Report. Washington, D.C.: National Republican Congressional Committee, 1979.

National Republican Congressional Committee. 1980 Post Election Report. Washington, D.C.: National Republican Congressional Committee, 1981.

National Association of Realtors. Unpublished letter dated October, 1982.

Sabato, Larry J. The Rise of Political Consultants. New York: Basic Books, Incorporated, 1981.

Thompson, James R., Adams, Don W., and 27 Republican County Chairmen. Unpublished letter dated October, 1982.

Wiseman, Richard L and Schenck-Hamlin, William. "A Multi-Dimensional Scaling Validation of an Inductively-Derived Set of Compliance-Gaining Strategies". Communication Monographs 48:251-270.